UNITED
NATIONS

CRC

Convention on the
Rights of the Child

Distr.
GENERAL

CRC/C/SR.466
4 June 1998

Original: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Eighteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 466th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 28 May 1998, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. KOLOSOV

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Initial report of Maldives

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GE.98-16362 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of Maldives (CRC/C/8/Add.33 and 37; CRC/C/Q/MAL/1)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Maldives took places at the Committee table.

2. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) said that nearly one half of the country's population was under 15 years of age. Although that share was expected to decline to 35 per cent by 2000, over the same period the actual number of children would increase by 15 per cent. As existing resources for child welfare and development were already stretched, new approaches and methods would have to be found. The Government had always made children's welfare a high priority, and it was fully aware of the links between successful national development and the circumstances of children.

3. Maldives had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. That year, declared the Year of the Maldivian Child, had also seen the National Conference on the Maldivian Child, which had adopted the Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of the Maldivian Child and led to the establishment of a National Programme of Action. Also in 1991 the Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child (Law 9/91) had been passed; it identified the guiding principles and objectives for the State, parents and the community to follow as part of their respective responsibilities towards children's overall development. Now, the major focus of the Government's legal work in implementing the rights of the child was the achievement of improved procedures, harmonized legislation and ratified policies in line with Law 9/91.

4. In 1992, the National Council for the Protection of the Rights of the Child had been established to monitor the objectives set under the National Plan of Action for Children. In the same year, the Unit for the Rights of the Child (URC) had been set up to support the Council's activities. The URC addressed a range of issues relating to children's rights, and was responsible for their promotion and the distribution of written materials to hospitals, health centres, clinics and schools throughout the atolls and islands. It had also distributed a Dhivehi translation of the Convention and copies of Law 9/91 throughout the country. It provided regular comment on child-related issues on national television and radio, and liaised with key ministries on the preparation of amendments to national laws in their areas of responsibility in accordance with Law 9/91.

5. The URC also provided training on the principles of the Convention for a wide range of staff from various ministries, aimed at raising awareness of children's issues in workplaces, encouraging appropriate institutional policies, practices and measures, and establishing a pool of people capable of providing counselling services. Training in understanding the Convention and in basic counselling skills was also provided for suitably qualified persons on the atolls, the URC's aim being to train personnel on all inhabited islands by the year 2000.

6. The Government was developing an appropriate range of welfare and rehabilitation institutions to address the needs of juvenile offenders. In that regard, significant amendments were also being made to the juvenile justice system and to family law. In order to facilitate the introduction of all the new arrangements, personnel from a number of ministries and the URC had completed a course on criminology and juvenile justice conducted by an Australian university.

7. The URC was also developing a range of services and facilities for children at the national and local levels, including community-based and residential services for children whose rights had been violated or who were in especially difficult circumstances, and a corrective and rehabilitative service for children in conflict with the law or involved in anti-social activities.

8. An analysis of the counselling services the URC provided for children in difficult circumstances and their families suggested that the underlying causes of most child-related problems were broken families and the very high rates of marriage, divorce and remarriage. The number of cases referred to the URC was rising fast, and there was particular concern that the relatively small number of children now engaged in anti-social activities might escalate and develop into a major problem if no preventive measures were taken. The Government had prepared new family legislation to protect the rights and interests of children in the light of the high incidence of divorce and remarriage.

9. The URC had established a national database to collect and store information on cases referred to the URC and to the offices which had been established on all 200 islands. The information received quarterly from the atolls was entered into the central database. In the future, the URC intended to incorporate statistics on the violation of children's education, health and nutrition rights.

10. Finally, despite the significant achievements of the past seven years in improving the protection of children's rights, considerable further work had to be done. The main priorities were to achieve changes in the formation of the family through legislation and awareness raising, to improve children's employment prospects by ensuring that they all completed their education, to establish fixed counselling services for children in conflict with the law or in especially difficult circumstances, to extend the database, to monitor children's situations regularly in order to identify vulnerable groups, and to increase training activities relating to the Convention.

11. Mrs. PALME asked whether, in view of the recent shift in the focus of Maldives' main economic activities, the Government anticipated problems in allocating the resources needed to fully implement the Convention, particularly in education and health.

12. Mr. RABAH asked how the report had been prepared and whether the leading NGOs had participated. He would also like to know if the courts took the Convention into account in cases where the rights of the child were concerned. Finally, he asked the delegation to describe ways in which the best interests of the child were reflected in Maldivian legislation.

13. Mrs. KARP asked whether the fact that the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare was responsible for children's rights reflected a wider assumption in Maldives that only women should be concerned with child care. Secondly, as the implementation of children's rights constituted part of a wider social programme, did they always receive due priority and attention, especially regarding budget allocations? Thirdly, she would like to know more about the interaction between the National Council and the URC in such areas as budgetary allocation, manpower and monitoring, and about the extent of NGO involvement in the preparation of the report.

14. Mr. FULCI congratulated Maldives on having been among the first countries to ratify the Convention and having enacted a law on the rights of the child so early. He would like to know more about the structure and functioning of the National Council, especially in the area of policy implementation, and about the bodies responsible for data collection.

15. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives), answering the questions which had just been asked, said that there had been a reduction in the external funding available for social welfare, health and education. In order to make up that shortfall, the Government had allocated a greater share of GDP to those areas, on the principle of "allocation to the maximum extent of resources available". The Government had felt constrained to take urgent action because of the very high number of children in the Maldivian population.

16. With regard to preparation of the report, she said that after collating the information on the various articles of the Convention received from ministries and departments, the URC had returned the information to its originators for confirmation, before compiling the report and forwarding it to the Committee.

17. Concerning ways in which the best interests of the child were reflected in national laws, she said that even before it had signed the Convention Maldives had enacted legislation in a number of areas, notably custody, which allowed the courts to decide the best interests of the child in cases where parents could not reach agreement.

18. Law 9/91, the principal legal instrument relating to children's rights, had been adopted after the accession of Maldives to the Convention. It therefore incorporated most provisions of the Convention, and the frequent use made of it in the courts was tantamount to invoking the Convention. Continuous efforts were being made to harmonize the Convention with national laws.

19. The fact that the URC now came under the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare was the result of government reorganization in 1996. The URC had originally been set up as part of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Regarding the relationship between the National Council and the URC, she said that the latter had originally been intended to function as the Council's secretariat. The work of the URC had then expanded considerably, to the extent that it was currently responsible for monitoring implementation of the Convention and related national legislation. The Council was a body whose members were designated by the President whose funding was included in the URC budget. The URC coordinated the Council's monthly meetings and submitted issues for its

consideration. The fact that the Council comprised high-level representatives from a wide range of ministries, the Attorney-General's Office and the Maldivian Parliament offered valuable networking opportunities and meant that urgent issues could be dealt with directly.

20. There were very few NGOs in Maldives, owing to a dearth of people outside government with the necessary educational qualifications. The two main ones, dealing with health and women's issues, had not contributed to the report.

21. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO said she would like to know more about the system of interaction between the organizations concerned with the protection of children's rights, given the extremely fragmented geographical nature of Maldives.

22. As to the translation of the Convention into Dhivehi, she asked whether all the population spoke that language. If not, what was being done to bring the Convention's principles and provisions to the attention of minority-language speakers, especially in view of the fact that so few people had completed their education.

23. She would like to know more about the mechanisms used by the URC in promoting awareness of the Convention, particularly among children and those who worked with them. The report stated that the URC had distributed 1,000 copies of the Convention to the public, which did not seem a great number. She would also like to know how the provisions of the Convention were received among the more traditional parts of society and among children themselves, particularly adolescents.

24. Finally, she would like further clarification about the relative standing of the Convention and national legislation, and the efforts being made to harmonize them. Was it the case that most of the Convention had been incorporated into national legislation, given the fact that the Constitution of Maldives had been adopted after ratification of the Convention?

25. Mrs. SARDENBERG asked what mechanisms were used to monitor implementation of the programme of action mentioned in the delegation's introductory statement, and what was the current status of that programme. She would also like to know the reasons for the URC's change of allegiance from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare. What influence did the new Ministry have and had the change been successful?

26. How did the extremely scattered nature of Maldives affect the coordination of activities for promoting children's rights? And what impact did the reported disparities in an otherwise stable economic growth rate have on the situation of children? Finally, she wondered whether the Government was considering ratifying the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which were normally regarded as the fundamental human rights instruments in the United Nations system, together with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

27. Mrs. KARP asked whether the Government had conducted any research to test the effectiveness of its efforts to disseminate knowledge of the Convention among children and the general public.

The meeting was suspended at 4 p.m. and resumed at 4.15 p.m.

28. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives), replying to Mrs. Ouedraogo's questions, explained that the URC was striving to overcome monitoring problems by instructing groups of decision and policy-makers on each island about the relevant legislation concerning children. Every year, URC staff visited four atolls, where four to five people from each island were trained to become outreach workers. In order to maintain close contact with those people, URC published four periodicals a year and, of course, used the existing telephone and fax links. Malé comprised four wards and it was likewise incumbent on ward leaders to report any incidents detrimental to children's well-being. Similarly, since primary and secondary schoolteachers and trainee teachers were taught about the Convention, they were fairly conversant with the legal issues at stake and children's needs.

29. Dhivehi was the only language spoken by all Maldivians. Although few people had completed higher education, more than 90 per cent of the population were literate and therefore able to read and understand the Convention. In addition, radio programmes regularly featured the Convention and Maldivians were avid listeners.

30. The question about a conflict between tradition and the Convention was most pertinent. Corporal punishment had been prohibited since the late 1970s and the URC frequently encountered complaints from parents claiming that their offspring were only too aware of their rights. She therefore requested the Committee's guidance on that subject. In an attempt to arrive at a compromise, a national exhibition on children's responsibilities and rights would be held before the end of 1998.

31. The Convention had been ratified before Law 9/91 had been passed. Although the Convention itself could not be invoked in court, its provisions were heeded by the judiciary, insofar as most of its clauses had been incorporated in national law.

32. A National Programme of Action had been drawn up. It had been reviewed by the National Council for the Protection of the Rights of the Child in 1997 and would be updated by the various ministries, because some targets had been achieved. Since the URC was an independent body, it had not been affected by the transfer from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare. She did not know the reason for the transfer.

33. Communication with all the islands was difficult. Nevertheless, since they had telephone links, a helpline had been set up the previous year. There was, however, undeniable disparity between the islands; most facilities were concentrated in the capital, Malé, despite the Government's efforts to provide each island with schools and health facilities, albeit of a lower standard than really desired.

34. Children might not possess a detailed knowledge of the Convention, but they had definitely been made aware of it through television programmes and pamphlets distributed to schools and libraries. Her Government was contemplating ratification of the International Covenants.

35. The CHAIRPERSON invited questions on the definition of the child and general principles.

36. Mrs. PALME sought clarification regarding the important issue of early marriage.

37. Mrs. KARP said that she was puzzled by the status of persons in the 16 to 21 age group. Law 9/91 did not reflect the Convention's philosophy that a child should be seen as an individual whose best interests should be of primary concern and whose views should be heard. She therefore wished to know if Maldives had considered embodying those principles in future laws. Why were 16 to 18-year-olds excluded from Maldivian legislation protecting children which in many respects was highly relevant to that age bracket.

38. Mr. FULCI pointed out that the Maldivian Constitution contained no provision specifically prohibiting discrimination on grounds of sex, race, religion, disability or language. Traditionally women's education had been curtailed and they had been victims of discrimination under Islamic law on inheritance and testimony in court. Referring in that connection to paragraph 30 of the report, he asked if girls were becoming more emancipated.

39. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO asked why the age of majority had been set at 16. What were the reasons behind relevant laws adopted after ratification of the Convention? What was the status of young people aged between 17 and 20? She believed that the minimum age of marriage should have been laid down by law and parents obliged to respect it. How were early marriages being discouraged? To what extent had the Maldivian Government applied the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women regarding non-discrimination in the education of boys and girls? If Maldivian women traditionally played the roles of wives and mothers, how did they account for 50 per cent of the workforce? What was the status of children born out of wedlock? What was the social position of unmarried mothers? What access did members of the various social strata have to cultural facilities? What was the status of aliens and their children? Did governmental decisions take the best interests of the child into account in the fields of education, nutrition, health and the child's general development? Lastly, she requested more information about the respect shown for the child's opinion in families and at school.

40. Mr. RABAH wished to know the period of compulsory education, the minimum age of employment, especially for girls, the age of criminal responsibility and the minimum age for military service.

41. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) explained that her country's laws were based on the Shariah, which stipulated that a girl could marry when she reached physical maturity, i.e. at the age of 15. Nevertheless, an attempt had been made to raise the minimum age of marriage to 16. As a very large section of the Maldivian population was very young, raising the age of majority to 18

would result in a substantial increase in the percentage of children in the population. Girls were not discriminated against in law, but attitudes were hard to change. Since the Shariah prohibited extramarital sex, parents were reluctant to allow their daughters to leave home to pursue their studies or look for work. Deprived of qualifications and employment, girls often found that the only option open to them was marriage. In Maldives in the past, girls had married at 13 or 14; early marriage currently meant before the age of 16.

42. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives) explained that the 16 to 21 age group were regarded as adults. Young people could obtain a driving licence at 18 and vote at 21. Her Government would take note of the comments made on Law 9/91, which was indeed designed to strengthen the protection afforded to children. She conceded that tradition and cultural factors usually led to girls inheriting less than their brothers. Government-owned land was, however, being divided equally between girls and boys, and parents were beginning to write wills that bequeathed their personal wealth equally among their offspring.

43. In order to combat the high divorce rate in Maldives, an awareness campaign was being conducted to alert people to the dangers of early marriage and difficulties attendant on divorce, although divorcees were not stigmatized socially. The new Family Law would contain stricter provisions on custody and maintenance and, at the same time, government programmes were being run to offer girls alternatives to early marriage. To that end, small industries were being set up and more secondary schools built, especially, in the southern Maldives, where girls accounted for an overwhelming proportion of pupils.

44. The extended family was the source of much assistance and support, so that even a mother of a large family could go out to work. Unfortunately that situation was changing owing to a trend towards smaller, nuclear families.

45. The best interests of the child were certainly considered as far as health, education and development were concerned. For that reason, the URC took every opportunity to explain to parents that the purpose of Law 9/91 was the overall development of the country predicated on the advancement of every individual. If children were to become good leaders in the future, they must be carefully nurtured and offered wider opportunities. The minimum age of employment was 16, while the age of criminal responsibility varied depending on the offence. There was no minimum age for national service, because the country did not have an army.

46. In response to the question about the position of foreign children, she explained that if a child had one Maldivian parent, he or she automatically acquired Maldivian nationality, provided the parents so wished.

47. Mrs. SARDENBERG asked if more educational opportunities for girls and fewer early marriages were contributing to an improvement in women's position in society. Had the National Policy on Women been adopted? Was it relevant to the girl child? Was there a group within Parliament which supervised the rights of the child and implementation of the Convention? Was there any possibility of securing the participation of island chiefs in work on the

rights of the child? Did Maldives benefit from any bilateral or multilateral overseas development programmes or projects run by United Nations agencies?

48. Mrs. KARP queried the compatibility of Maldivian policy on early marriage with article 1 of the Convention. She asked what measures had been adopted to enable children to participate in the administration of schools and institutions, decisions on placement in institutions, complaints procedures and court hearings (not only those relating to custody). Did pupils help to draw up school rules and curricula?

49. She drew attention to the connection between the best interests of the child and his right to be heard. Since she felt that it was impossible to say what those best interests were without bearing in mind the views of the child himself, she was anxious to know whether that new approach was explained in seminars and guidelines for professional groups.

50. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO said that she wished to return to some questions which had not been answered by the delegation, namely those relating to programmes to give stronger protection to the rights of the girl child, societal organization, access to culture, respect for the child's opinion, and advice to more conservative families who complained that their children were over-zealous in demanding their rights and who had difficulty in accepting the notion of children's rights.

51. She did not quite understand why raising the age of majority to 18 and therefore increasing the number of minors in the population was a problem, and she was still mystified by the status of 16 to 20-year-olds.

52. Mrs. PALME, inquiring about sexual equality in Maldives, considered that while inequality between boys and girls was not enshrined in the law, she gathered that there was de facto inequality occasioned by prevailing social conditions, such as reluctance to allow girls to leave their islands in order to pursue high-school education. Since the Islamic Sharia was unclear on the subject of equality with regard to inheritance, she wondered whether the relevant provisions existed in civil law.

53. The prevalence of divorce and remarriage perforce affected both healthy and disabled children, despite efforts to encourage stability and the fact that women, who were in the majority, were often economically self-reliant.

54. Mr. RABAH, following up his previous question, asked whether the Government of Maldives intended to withdraw its two stated reservations to implementation of the Convention with regard to inheritance and adoption.

55. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) replied that since both reservations were founded on the Sharia, the Government would certainly not withdraw them.

56. All land was currently government-owned and was no longer purchasable. The proportions of an inheritance were not dictated by civil law, and while those who wished could apply the tenets of the Sharia whereby a boy inherited two thirds of property and a girl one third, property was usually divided equally.

57. Replying to Mrs. Palme, she said that there were no specialized groups within Parliament for dealing with specific issues. A new plan for national policy on women had been drafted but not yet adopted. So confident were the authorities that it would be passed without major amendment that its guidelines were already informing current policy.

58. Divorce was traditionally initiated by men, in accordance with the Sharia. While women could seek divorce in the courts, the process was a difficult one. It was hoped that the divorce rate would decline and that easy divorces for men would diminish with a new law currently being drafted and which would oblige them, too, to resort to the courts, where reconciliation would be the first recommended solution.

59. Clarifying her earlier statement concerning the difficulty of raising the maximum age of the child to 18, she said that to do so within an already very young population would stretch the highly inadequate resources earmarked for children's needs. The main reason, however, remained the fact that the age limit was based on the Sharia.

60. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives), replying to the question on women's leadership, said that despite her country's long tradition of Island and Atoll Chiefs - which could only be phased out with time, an Island Development Committee, half of whose members must be women, had been established and was required to take any island-level decisions. The Island Women's Committee and the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare were also boosting women's awareness of their rights and affording them social and economic empowerment in order to prevent men from continuing to receive credit for work done and decisions taken by women.

61. She appreciated the distinct connection between the best interests of the child and his right to be heard, as did most education personnel. Most schools had committees and boards at which children were encouraged to voice their opinions. Although no such formal arrangements existed for the home, parents were advised on proper child-rearing and care. The URC was also represented on most child-related committees and was consulted on all children's issues. No child was ever placed in the Education and Training Centre for Children - the country's only child rehabilitation centre - without his consent.

62. It was explained to parents lodging general complaints about legislation with the URC that it had been established in the best interests of the child. However, the more usual complaints by parents about a specific aspect of a child's behaviour were met with counselling on basic parenting or learning skills, given simultaneously to child and parent.

63. Young people between 16 and 21 were not automatically mistreated. They were simply covered by a different section of Maldivian legislation and their interests were protected by the Ministry of Youth, which addressed youth issues and conducted youth programmes.

64. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) said that the National Programme for the Promotion of the Girl Child had polled parents on their expectations for their children and found them ambitious for both sons and daughters to receive higher education. However, they had earmarked their sons for the prestigious

professions, and their daughters for professions that would keep them nearer home. The National Programme had embarked upon a parent awareness-raising campaign, but mainly with regard to equal access to health and education.

65. The CHAIRPERSON invited members to comment on the delegation's replies.

66. Mrs. SARDENBERG said she was pleased to learn that Maldives now had a Ministry of Youth and wondered what coordination existed between that Ministry and the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare. Given the country's concern with young people, what was the former's role in the implementation of the Convention?

67. Mrs. PALME, pursuing the question of discrimination between girls and boys, said the fact that special programmes for the promotion of girls and discussion with parents were a focal point of policy, appeared to suggest that discrimination existed, although not under the law. That was an important matter, and was reflected in the divorce laws, which gave an inordinate degree of freedom to men, enabling them to take the initiative in divorce proceedings. The common reference to "marrying off" girls was unnatural even in its language and reflected an attitude not unique to Maldives, and one confronted by many developed countries. She simply wished to emphasize the importance of such work and underscore the inequalities between boys and girls.

68. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) explained that although youth and sport had been removed from the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare, youth comprised both sexes so that youth programmes and policy also concerned young women. That Ministry checked whether youth programmes targeted young women as well as young men, and was striving to make the public realize that young women were equally a part of the youth population.

69. The only course of action the country could currently adopt in order to alter the traditional attitude that girls should be "married off" was to promote awareness and provide more education and training for women.

70. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives), replying to Mrs. Sardenberg, said that coordination of the various child-related government bodies was ensured by the Ministry of Youth's representation on the National Council for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and on the National Council for Youth Affairs, on which the URC was also represented, as it was on the National Council for Women's Affairs. Children did not cease to be protected after the age of 16. Their rights, as young people, were simply protected by a different Ministry.

71. The CHAIRPERSON invited members' comments on civil rights and freedoms.

72. Mr. FULCI inquired whether the child's right to freedom of association and assembly, as enshrined in article 15 of the Convention, was explicitly recognized in Maldives legislation.

73. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO asked what fine was imposed on parents who failed to register a child's birth and what measures were in place, pursuant to the Convention, to facilitate registration, especially in the outlying islands.

74. While welcoming the amendment of the citizenship law, she wondered why the child of a foreign father and Maldivian mother did not automatically accede to Maldivian citizenship as occurred in the reverse case, and inquired as to the conditions necessary for such accession. She also wished to know the circumstances, if any, in which a child could lose Maldivian citizenship.

75. She inquired what measures were being taken by the Government to encourage children's free expression of thought, conscience and religion. Since the country was entirely Muslim, as stated in the report, she wondered whether there were any non-Muslim Maldivians and, if so, what was their social status, and whether they were discriminated against. For instance, were mixed marriages allowed? The fact that non-Muslims could practise their religion in the privacy of their homes, implying that they were prevented from doing so in public, suggested religious discrimination.

76. She inquired what specific measures had been adopted by the Government to ensure compliance with the provisions on torture and ill-treatment contained in paragraphs 46 and 47 of the report. Did any monitoring, complaint or rehabilitation mechanisms exist? Were children aware of the provision, and by what procedures were they encouraged to denounce abuse, even when perpetrated by their families?

77. She sought additional information concerning measures for censorship of films and video recordings and parental permission for child viewing of violent and pornographic material and wondered whether parental control was encouraged through education. Given the country's booming tourist industry, she also wondered whether children were routinely informed about paedophile, child-abduction and prostitution rings.

78. Mrs. KARP asked whether corporal punishment was prohibited in institutions other than schools, and whether parents were counselled on its prevention. It would also be interesting to know the situation of students over 16 - who were legally no longer children - with regard to corporal punishment.

79. Mr. RABAH inquired about the conditions for foreigners to accede to Maldivian nationality and whether a child's situation was affected by his parents' loss of nationality, for whatever reason.

80. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) explained that the Constitutions established certain conditions for foreigners to become Maldivian citizens, such as a determined period of residence in Maldives, literacy and adherence to the Muslim faith. Maldivian citizens could marry foreigners, provided that they belonged to or adopted the Muslim faith. The parents could decide which of the two nationalities the child should adopt.

81. Replying to Mrs. Ouedraogo, she explained that, inasmuch as Maldives had no churches, synagogues or temples, the provision that non-Muslims could practise their religion in privacy was intended to be practical rather than discriminatory.

82. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives), in response to Mr. Fulci's question, said that the child's right to freedom was not included in Law 9/91. Replying to

Mrs. Karp, she reiterated that inhumane treatment was prohibited in all institutions, and parents who discovered any case could complain to the Ministry of Education or the URC, both of which would refer the matter to the courts. No special monitoring mechanism was needed because, given the country's tiny population, any incidents were rapidly discovered and could be reported by anyone. If they occurred on an island, the body to which complaints were submitted was either the Ministry of Education or the Island Office, whence they were transmitted to the URC and thence to the Attorney-General's Office. It was mandatory in Maldives to report any known or suspected cases of physical or psychological abuse, and the informant was assured of confidentiality.

83. National and foreign films and video recordings were viewed by one "censor board", which rated them fit or unfit for children's viewing. Another at the Education Development Centre censored books and pamphlets, and yet a third censored productions on Television Maldives. Since all videos were censored, no need was felt for a child-information system on the dangers of paedophile rings and sex crimes. However, it might become necessary with the introduction of the Internet.

84. To her knowledge, no person had ever lost his nationality in Maldives. If such a case were to occur, children should not be affected; that was a topic worthy of consideration.

85. Births were attended by health workers and/or the traditional birth attendants ("foolhuma"), who issued the father with a registration form, which had to be delivered to the Island Office within seven days. Non-compliance carried a fine which, although small, was aggregated and so served as a deterrent. Children seeking normal medical check-ups were required to show their birth certificates and defaulters were soon discovered. If investigation showed that the father was unable to pay the fine, the birth certificate was still issued. The intimacy among inhabitants of islands with tiny populations made such occurrences rare. The need for regular reporting to the Department of Public Health and the Ministry of Health and entry into the database encouraged compliance.

86. Replying to Mrs. Karp's question, she said that the law prohibited corporal punishment of all persons in schools, not merely of children. Therefore reports of violence in any institution were duly investigated.

87. Freedom of expression was not explicitly provided for in Law 9/91.

88. Mr. RABAH asked whether the application of the Sharia, the Koran and other sources was merely customary or whether it was specifically embodied in legislation.

89. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) explained that explicit provisions in the Sharia, concerning such matters as inheritance, testimony and headship of the State, were also clearly stated in the Constitution, while the remainder of the Constitution and the laws were merely guided by the Sharia.

90. Mr. RABAH asked whether the requirement of adherence to the Muslim faith for acceding to Maldivian citizenship was based on the Sharia.

91. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) replied that it was not.

92. Mr. RABAH asked whether that requirement ran counter to the Sharia, which did not differentiate between Muslim and non-Muslim.

93. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) explained that while the nationality law was not contrary to the Sharia, it was not based on it, but rather on the need to protect the sovereignty of a tiny nation.

94. Mrs. SARDENBERG wondered whether there were other fundamental aspects that were not based on the Sharia.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.

UNITED
NATIONS

CRC

Convention on the
Rights of the Child

Distr.
GENERAL

CRC/C/SR.467
19 October 1998

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Eighteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 467th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 29 May 1998, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Miss MASON

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STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (continued)

Initial report of Maldives (continued)

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GE.98-16373 (E)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

1. Mrs. ROBINSON (High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that children were one of the highest priorities of her mandate and that the Five-Year Implementation Review of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action presented an opportunity to assess progress made in the field of children's rights.

2. The Convention on the Rights of the Child had been ratified by virtually all countries, as recommended by the World Conference on Human Rights. In confirming the indivisibility of fundamental civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, the Convention laid the framework for a system-wide integrated approach to human rights.

3. As recognized by the World Conference on Human Rights, there was a need for increased cooperation among United Nations bodies active in the field of human rights and for a regular review of the situation of children in accordance with their respective mandates. While there was room for improved interaction between the treaty bodies on the one hand, and the rapporteurs and experts of the Commission on Human Rights on the other, there was a noticeable trend to better integrate children's rights into the special procedures. At its previous session, the Commission had devoted special attention to the question of integrating gender issues into its work. At its next session it might focus on children's rights; if so, the Committee's input would be most welcome.

4. She hoped that the rights of the child and the Committee's own recommendations would be a guiding reference in the efforts to establish an International Criminal Court and approve its statute at the Diplomatic Conference to be held in Rome in June 1998.

5. The Committee's interaction with a number of partners, including UNICEF and the NGO Group for the Rights of the Child, had become a model for other mechanisms. That partnership had contributed to spreading a child-rights culture. In that regard, she stressed a few developments of particular interest to the Committee. Firstly, it had been proposed to prepare, at the forthcoming Annual Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO), a new Convention on the most extreme forms of child labour, which, when adopted, was expected to reinforce existing international standards on the rights of the child. Secondly, it had been decided to convene, in 2001, a follow-up conference to the World Summit for Children. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights was considering its own input in that process, including in the area of training, education, and national capacity-building. Thirdly, her Office and UNAIDS had jointly published International Guidelines on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights, which would no doubt be useful for the Committee's forthcoming day of general discussion on Children living in a world with HIV/AIDS.

6. On the subject of children in armed conflict, she shared the view of the Committee and of a majority of Governments and important partners (including UNICEF, UNHCR, ICRC, many NGOs and the Special Representative of the

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Secretary-General on children in armed conflict, Mr. Otunnu), that a clear limit of 18 years should be set for all forms of child participation in hostilities, either direct or indirect. National legislation should not be regarded as an obstacle to the elaboration of such new international norms. She was convinced that the Committee's input to the following session of the Working Group would contribute to the desired result.

7. She was particularly concerned by child trafficking and exploitation. All efforts to curb that phenomenon, including follow-up activities to the Stockholm Congress on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children were to be encouraged. The Working Group of the Commission on Human Rights had not yet completed its work. In any event, full implementation of existing international norms, especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child, had to remain a priority.

8. She was convinced that the continued support provided to the Committee through the Plan of Action to strengthen the implementation of the Convention was highly useful in dealing with its heavy workload. It was her hope that the survey on technical cooperation initiated under the Plan could become, through regular contributions by the Committee's main partners, especially UNICEF, ILO/IPEC, UNHCR, WHO, UNAIDS, the NGO community and her own Office, a conduit for the identification of needs for technical cooperation at the country level, and could facilitate such cooperation and foster increased coordination and complementarity among the various partners.

9. Despite the support provided through the Plan of Action, the Committee still faced difficulties in performing its tasks; the fact that the Committee met for 12 weeks each year, with a limited membership of 10, had sometimes led to difficulties, and required a special effort on the part of each member to ensure its adequate functioning. She would spare no effort to facilitate a rapid entry into force of the amendment increasing the Committee's membership to 18. To date, 60 States (half of the required number) had officially accepted that amendment.

10. The CHAIRPERSON invited Committee members to ask questions or make comments.

11. Mr. FULCI observed that the Committee's proposal to include action to combat violations of the rights of the child in the mandate of the new International Criminal Court had met with fierce resistance. He felt that the High Commissioner's support in that regard could be extremely useful and urged her to speak out on behalf of the rights of children the world over in her statement to the Diplomatic Conference in Rome.

12. Mrs. SARDENBERG, returning to the question of the integration of the rights of the child, pointed out that the Committee had already succeeded in changing attitudes to children throughout the world. All the same, it was equally essential to ensure that the rights of the child were integrated into United Nations activities. The follow-up conference to the World Summit for Children should enable the Committee to assess the progress made by the countries under their plans of action, so that it could be taken into account when those countries' implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was under consideration.

13. Mr. KOLOSOV, referring to the amendment to increase the Committee's membership to 18, asked for an updated list of the States that had accepted it to be distributed to members.

14. Mrs. ROBINSON (High Commissioner for Human Rights) agreed to raise the question of children's rights in her statement to the Diplomatic Conference in Rome. With regard to the integration of those rights, she pointed out that she had established an internal working group, one of whose tasks was to consider ways of further integrating the rights of the child into United Nations activities. She saw no reason why a list of countries that had accepted the amendment should not be made available to members, and added that in such a year of assessment, in which there was greater concern for universal adherence to international instruments, more States should be encouraged to do so.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORT OF STATES PARTIES (item 4 of the agenda) (continued)

Initial report of Maldives (continued) [(CRC/C/8/Add.33 and Add.37; CRC/C/Q/MAL/1) (List of issues to be taken up in connection with the consideration of the initial report of Maldives; written replies by the Government of Maldives to the questions raised in the list of issues, unreferenced document distributed at the meeting)]

15. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Maldives resumed their places at the Committee table.

Civil rights and freedoms [questions 20 to 25 of the list of issues (CRC/C/Q/MAL/1)] (continued)

16. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives) said that a number of awareness-raising programmes had been launched in the archipelago to help parents desist from inflicting corporal punishment on their children. The authorities had published a brochure and organized several radio broadcasts to teach parents to control their anger and frustration. Counselling services and a telephone helpline were also available for parents experiencing difficulties in caring for their children.

17. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) said that there was no provision in Maldivian law that contradicted the Sharia.

Family environment and alternative care (questions 26 to 31 of the list of issues)

18. Ms. PALME wished to know how the parents of a child born out of wedlock were treated under Maldivian law. Did the mother receive any support during her pregnancy? Were the parents sanctioned in any way?

19. Mr. RABAH noted that, according to the report, more and more children found themselves in precarious circumstances owing to the high divorce rate. He asked what measures the Maldivian authorities planned to take in order to bring that rate down. Mention was also made in the report of an increase in

the number of cases of abuse in Maldives. He would like to have further information concerning current or planned programmes to combat that phenomenon.

20. Mrs. OUEDRAGO wished to know whether the Maldivian authorities had studied the impact of frequent divorce and remarriage on children's psychological and moral health. The report stated that in the event of divorce, children were taken into the care of a member of the extended family. She asked whether that did not have consequences not mentioned in the report, and wished to know what measures the Government had taken to re-establish parental responsibility and guidance, which in most cases were jeopardized by "multiple" marriages. Were there any parental guidance courses and family counselling services?

21. With regard to the situation of children separated from their parents, she noted that there was a residential institution exclusively for boys. What happened to girls? Were they obliged to remain in the extended family whatever the circumstances? Referring to paragraph 32 of the report (CRC/C/8/Add.33), which stated, in substance, that when a divorced mother was to remarry and have other children, custody of the children of the first marriage was offered to a relative, she asked whether that was the sole solution or whether a divorced woman could, from the viewpoint of Islamic tradition and laws, keep the children of the first marriage. Was the child's opinion taken into account?

22. What measures existed for recovering child support in the event of divorce? Was there any mechanism to ensure that the father fulfilled his obligation?

23. She understood that marriage between blood relations existed in Maldives. Were they voluntary or were they negotiated between the two families? How were they celebrated, according to Islamic law or according to the legislation in force?

24. According to paragraph 59 of the report, there was no "formalized" system of adoption in Maldives. How were a child's interests protected when adoption was authorized by the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs? Did the child have any say in the matter?

25. Lastly, she asked whether the members of the delegation saw any connection between early marriages, multiple divorces, brutality, violence and child abuse on the one hand, and rising juvenile delinquency on the other.

26. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives) said that a child born out of wedlock was treated like any other child with regard to education and health services. However, he could not inherit from his father unless the latter recognized his paternity. In the case of offending parents, the mother was placed under house arrest for a year and the father was exiled to another island, also for a year.

27. The high incidence of divorce was certainly one of the most acute problems confronting the Maldivian authorities. In 1995, representatives from all the islands had met at a nationwide conference to adopt a set of measures

to combat the problem. They included, in particular, a programme designed to alert the population to the disastrous consequences of divorce for children, and the adoption of legislation in the field of family law. The Maldivian authorities had repeatedly attempted to conduct a survey on the impact of frequent divorce and remarriage on children, but the project had had to be abandoned owing to the inordinate number of factors at stake. However, she agreed that such a study should be undertaken as a matter of priority.

28. In cases of separation it was the mother who normally took care of the children and there was nothing to prevent her from remarrying and keeping the children of a previous marriage. It was true that custody of a child to a member of an extended family posed certain problems, but it was also a social phenomenon that ensured that the children were protected. What the extended family did generally was to help the mother take better care of her children.

29. The Maldivian authorities provided parental guidance courses and family counselling. When it came to restoring parental responsibility, it was unusual for any member of the family to be unwilling to accept custody.

30. The increase in abuse cases did not necessarily mean that the actual numbers were rising, but rather that Maldivians were more aware that such problems existed and less reluctant to report them. Staff members of the Unit for the Rights of the Child of the Ministry of Home Affairs gave talks on ill-treatment and sexual abuse at educational establishments of all kinds. Their brochures and programmes were also extensively distributed.

31. Under the poster campaigns and numerous programmes, fathers were encouraged to support their children. A project designed to create a home for girls with family problems was being prepared and funds had been sought to implement it. When the problems girls had with their parents could not be solved, they were entrusted, with their consent, to a relative for a limited period. Divorced women who remarried normally kept their children from previous marriages. From the age of seven, the child had the right to choose in whose custody he would remain. In the case of divorce, the courts guaranteed payment of a maintenance allowance. The problem lay not only with fathers who refused to pay the allowance, but also with mothers who did not wish to accept it. For some years now the Unit for the Rights of the Child had been trying to persuade those women to accept the maintenance allowance in the child's interests. Consideration was being given to granting visiting rights to parents who lived apart from their children.

32. All marriages were entered into with free consent and were registered with the court. There being no formalized system of adoption in Maldives, if an orphan could not be placed in the custody of a relative or a friend of his parents, the Government provided financial assistance to the family that agreed to look after him. Furthermore, there were plans to conduct studies on the possible links between multiple remarriages and divorces on the one hand, and child violence and juvenile delinquency on the other. Of the cases of abuse reported to the Unit for the Rights of the Child, 56 per cent were attributable to divorcee households.

33. Mrs. KARP asked what the social and cultural reasons were for the high incidence of divorce, which was all the more surprising since Maldives was an

Islamic country. She queried the compatibility of article 23 of Act No. 9/91 on the protection of the rights of the child with the provisions of articles 5 and 18 of the Convention, which deal with parental responsibilities. She wished to know more about the awareness campaigns concerning sexual violence against children. What measures were taken to assist girls who were victims of sexual abuse?

34. How many family counsellors and specialists were involved in the rehabilitation of abused children? Were there any homes for battered wives? Could the courts issue a restraining order on husbands who beat their wives? Had there been any deaths from violence in the family?

35. Mrs. SARDENBERG asked for clarification of the official notification limiting the number of remarriages for the same couple. In that connection, she underscored the need to draft a law on the family and for education and awareness campaigns to be organized. Had specific measures been taken to prepare such a law? She encouraged the State party to expand its interpretation of the provisions contained in articles 3 and 12 of the Convention. She wished to know what measures were being taken to address the problems of children who spent their time in the streets and formed themselves into gangs. In that connection, she invited the State party to seek international cooperation, particularly from NGOs.

36. Mr. FULCI asked whether the existence of multiple marriages and a "polynuclear" type of extended family did not have undesirable consequences for children and their behaviour. He considered that in the absence of a formalized system of adoption, the State party should take steps to facilitate permanent adoption of children either in Maldives or elsewhere. Had the Government considered adhering to the Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Inter-County Adoption?

37. The CHAIRPERSON, speaking in her personal capacity, was of the view that the report of Maldives (CRC/C/8/Add.33) provided insufficient details on the exercise of children's rights regarding, for instance, recovery of maintenance for the child, children deprived of a family environment, and illicit transfer and non-return. She called, in particular, for details concerning the real condition of girls.

38. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) replied that girls were more protected than boys and enjoyed less freedom. For example, they could not leave their atolls to study on other islands. At the time when the residential institution for boys was established, it was only boys who came and went freely in the streets. However, cases of girls doing so having been reported, a project for a similar girls' institution had been prepared.

39. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives) explained that there was a ban on sexual relations outside marriage, which explained the large number of marriages, followed by divorces, when married couples realized that they were not happy together. The spouses and their respective families did not bear each other any grudge. It was possible that Law 9/91 disregarded the rights of parents with regard to parental responsibility, but if the Government intervened, it did so in the child's own interests, when parents were not in a position to meet the child's health and education needs.

40. Awareness campaigns on sexual violence against children had had positive results because they had been geared to parents from the outset. Parents were averse to reporting cases of sexual violence to the authorities because of the potential social consequences for the victims. The Government had taken pains to see that professions that maintained contact with children were familiarized with the provisions of the Convention and Law 9/91. Training courses had been organized with the cooperation of foreign universities for prosecutors, judges, education advisers and law enforcement officials. Her Government was doing all it could to obtain help from the Centre for Human Rights and from a number of organizations in that field. Seven persons were currently employed by the Unit for the Rights of the Child and four others were being trained abroad. In addition, 150 persons had received rudimentary training on the islands and another 50 were receiving more extensive training in the capital, Malé. In addition to the Unit for the Rights of the Child, two NGOs provided advisory services. The authorities were striving to strengthen the traditional monitoring structures set up for the extended family and the community.

41. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) said that there were no homes for battered wives in Maldives. Generally speaking, women did not report that type of situation, and if they did, they tended to withdraw their complaint subsequently. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare did its best to apprise women of their rights and encourage them to file cases of family violence in the courts.

42. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives) explained that the same man and woman could marry each other three times running, after which they had to marry other partners. Then they were free to marry again three times. The number of marriage cycles of that kind was limited to three, however, which meant nine marriages for the same couple. In cases of violence within the family, a restraining order could be issued against a husband in order to protect the mother and child. Education and training centres had been opened for boys since 1979 in order to forestall delinquency, because boys were beginning to take to the streets. Nothing had been planned for girls, who did not rebel in the same way and married earlier. However, in Malé, for instance, 70,000 inhabitants were crowded into 2.5 square kilometres. The fact that children swarmed in the streets did not mean that they slept there.

43. Multiple marriages did generate emotional problems and behavioural disorders in children. Handbooks had been prepared both for children and their parents in cases of divorce. While the high divorce rate was regrettable, children did not always appreciate their situation, because it was so common in Maldives. There was no "formalized" system of adoption in the archipelago. That practice had not been welcomed by public opinion, which feared that children would suffer more than if they were placed in a family. Her Government had not yet considered authorizing inter-country adoption of children. It did, however, plan to open an orphanage.

44. Mrs. KARP asked what divorce signified in Maldives and what the power relations were between the two partners. Were women prosecuted in the courts for adultery? Were there any homes for young victims of violence?

45. Ms. PALME noted the disintegration of the extended family in Maldives. She asked whether the Government should not give thought to an effective system for monitoring children placed in families, rather than setting up an orphanage. She asked for details on the size of the planned orphanage.

46. Mr. RABAH asked whether there was any plan to legalize "kafalah", the tutelary system under Islamic law, as a substitute for adoption, which was prohibited by the Koran.

47. The CHAIRPERSON, speaking in her personal capacity, asked whether, in the case of sexual abuse, the child was entitled to file a complaint before a court or whether only parents enjoyed that right. It would be interesting to know the family hierarchical structure, given the frequency of divorce, and the status of the mother-in-law. Was there any youth guidance system that helped people become better acquainted before marrying, and so avoid the infernal cycle of marriage and divorce?

48. Mr. KOLOSOV asked whether polygamy was accepted in Maldivian society, as in other Islamic countries.

49. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives) said that men were more likely to seek divorce than women. However, studies conducted for the Conference on the Family (1995) showed that men often sought divorce under pressure from their wives. Divorced women were, by and large, supported by their families and were not socially stigmatized. The question of adultery was governed by the Shariah. Advisory services were open to all, but provided no follow-up unless those involved voluntarily returned for consultation.

50. Ms. YOOSUF (Maldives) acknowledged that the placement of children in institutions was not an ideal solution. According to the ancestral culture of Maldives, placement of a child in a family or his community was always preferable. Indeed, members of Maldivian society tended to help and take care of one another, with or without family ties. The elderly therefore remained in their families, even though an old people's home did exist.

51. In response to Mr. Kolosov, she said that polygamy was accepted, although not encouraged. The practice was not intended to discourage divorce, as in other Islamic countries. Women perceived it as a negative experience.

52. In response to Mr. Rabah, she said that it was not unusual for people to foster a child. "Kafalah" was envisaged in the context of Maldives in parallel with the question of adoption.

53. On the subject of sexual abuse, she said that children often preferred to turn to teachers rather than to their parents. However, teacher training in the subject was limited.

54. In general, couples wishing to marry or divorce did not seek advice from anyone. The Government had intended to set up a family guidance body, but the plan had had to be shelved owing to lack of funds and qualified personnel.

Basic health and welfare (questions 32 to 36 of the List of issues)

Education, leisure and cultural activities (questions 37 to 40 of the List of issues)

55. Mr. FULCI asked about the measures taken by the Maldivian Government to combat malnutrition and growth retardation. Was there a nationwide plan of action to reduce the incidence of malnutrition? What was the Government doing to protect children from sexual tourism and the risks of exposure to drug abuse and HIV/AIDS infection associated with that phenomenon? Were children alerted to the risk involved? Was the evolution of this scourge monitored and what could the international community do to help eliminate it?

56. Ms. PALME endorsed the questions raised by Mr. Fulci on malnutrition and the impact of tourism on the problems of sexual exploitation of children and the spread of HIV/AIDS. She wished to know whether the school results of children, particularly girls, placed as servants in families living far away were as good as those who remained in their own families. Were the problems of child development linked to early marriages, the frequency of divorce or the nutritional situation? Had the Maldives sought international cooperation in its quest for solutions to those problems?

57. Mrs. KARP wished to know how many children were currently housed in institutions. It appeared from the report (CRC/C/8/Add.33) that the policy on disabled children was community-based, which was laudable. But were schools equipped to deal with disabled children? How were children with mental problems treated in the community? Were there any studies or statistics on the subject? Was anything being done to prevent disabilities, particularly through information and education of parents? Were adolescents with special problems, such as drug abuse, looked after? Since there was no university in Maldives, how were specialists, such as psychologists, social workers or probation officers, recruited? Did young people wishing to continue their studies beyond the twelfth year receive any financial assistance to study abroad? Lastly, had any cases of female sexual mutilation been reported in the country?

58. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO wished to have more information on the practice of abortion, the existence or otherwise of family planning services, breastfeeding, and the effects of early weaning. Did children and parents play any role in establishing educational standards, and were children heard before disciplinary action was taken against them? Were classes overcrowded because of the small number of schools? Were human rights, more particularly the rights of the child, taught?

59. Mrs. SARDENBERG wished to know whether there was a breastfeeding promotion policy, and whether any sign language had been devised for deaf mutes.

60. Ms. SHIHAM (Maldives) said that malnutrition in the country was not caused by food shortage, but rather by an unbalanced diet. In that connection, there had been numerous cases of adolescents fainting or feeling unwell at school after skipping breakfast. The Government had developed a nationwide plan of action on malnutrition, as well as an information campaign

on proper diet. It was preparing a marketing code for breast-milk substitutes. A study on vitamin A deficiency was in progress. Growth retardation was a major problem and efforts were being made countrywide to identify affected children and offer them a more balanced diet for a period of time in order to put them back on the right track. The widespread drop in consumption of fresh vegetables was due less to progressive water salination, which reduced arable land, than to the economic development of Maldives, which had engendered in the population an excessive taste for imported products, especially tinned goods. UNICEF was involved in an information campaign on the virtues of eating fresh vegetables.

61. On the subject of sexual exploitation of children by foreigners, she explained that tourists to Maldives had virtually no contact with the population. They arrived at an international airport on an uninhabited island, whence they were immediately transferred to the various beach resorts, where they lived quite self-sufficiently for two or three weeks. The atolls that housed those resorts were not inhabited by the indigenous population and most employees there were immigrant workers. No children worked on those islands. When tourists left their hotel complex to visit Malé or other islands, they were always accompanied by a guide, who ensured that they respected a code of conduct. All travel had to be approved by the Ministry of Tourism. Most of the population, therefore, rarely saw foreigners, and there were probably some remote atolls still on which no tourist had ever set foot.

62. The drug consumption problem was extremely acute. Maldives was a transit point for large numbers of travellers to other countries. An anti-drugs agency and a treatment centre had been set up to halt the proliferation of drugs. The centre currently attended some 15 patients, some of whom had voluntarily sought treatment. When treatment was voluntary, the patient's identity was not communicated to the authorities. A court could order a delinquent to register for a detoxification cure by putting him on probation for a period not exceeding three years. Drug trafficking was an offence governed by separate legislation.

63. An inter-ministerial council was responsible for determining the policies and programmes to be prepared in the fight against AIDS and to identify infected individuals. Only eight HIV-infected persons had been discovered in the country so far, none of whom were children. However, the Government was not relaxing its vigilance. A massive information campaign was being conducted, using posters and radio and television broadcasts. Immigrant workers and seamen and students returning from abroad had to undergo a compulsory screening test. The same was true of pregnant women and all patients about to undergo surgery. The very high incidence of thalassaemia, a blood disease that required child sufferers to have a monthly transfusion, meant that the health authorities needed to be extremely careful in selecting blood donors.

64. All the authorities, the Unit for the Right of the Child, the anti-drug agency, and the social security service had been collaborating for three years under a prevention programme alerting parents and students to the dangers of drug abuse. Counsellors, mainly volunteers, went from school to school, distributing brochures and leaflets informing parents of the measures they could take and the assistance they could receive for treatment.

65. Many children from other islands worked in Malé as domestics. They were supposed to participate in the life of the household just as their employers' children did. No special study had been carried out to determine whether their school results were affected. It should be observed that many persons employed in the central administration came from remote islands.

66. There was an institution for disabled children which currently cared for 68 boys. A study was in progress on some islands, but the exact number of disabled children was not known because they were traditionally cared for by their families. Government action was restricted to the provision of financial assistance for procuring the necessary materials and equipment, and medical assistance to mentally handicapped children. One school in Malé had a special class for deaf-and-dumb children. However, no sign language had been devised. It was not known whether there was a connection between mental disability and early marriage. However, marriage between blood relations on some islands would seem to be a determining factor.

67. Students leaving secondary school were obliged to go abroad for university education. They received scholarships from the Government, which benefited from bilateral aid and World Bank assistance to that end. The reason there was no university in Maldives was that the likely number of enrolments each year was much too small to make it feasible. Pupils who did not complete their secondary studies could enrol in vocational training in the fields of primary education, management, or health and hotel services, or they could follow technical education. Doctors were trained in neighbouring countries like Australia.

68. No case of female sexual mutilation had been reported in Maldives. Abortion was illegal. Family planning services were being developed for some years now, because of the high birth rate. Breastfeeding was encouraged, and easily so, since it was practised by 90 per cent of the population.

69. At school, children took part in the deliberations of the school boards and helped, for instance, in the preparation of leisure facilities and in the selection of some of the subjects taught. The curriculum was modelled on the British system. The Government was sparing no effort to raise the quality of teachers and recruited for that purpose a number of foreign teachers who taught in Maldives; however, it had found it difficult to attract the best, since it was not in a position to offer them competitive conditions of employment. Most schools had a disciplinary board, which examined any serious infringement. Classes had an average of 30 pupils. With regard to human rights education, she referred the Committee to paragraph 38 of the written replies, which stated that a national curriculum had been developed and implemented in 1984 and that efforts were made to review curricula, giving more emphasis to the rights of children.

The meeting rose at 1.02 p.m.